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SUBJECT: PAPAL VISIT TO BRAZIL: A PREVIEW

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Pope Benedict XVI travels to Brazil May 9-13 to open a plenary session of the council of Latin American and Caribbean bishops conferences (CELAM). The three most recent continental meetings (Colombia 1968, Mexico 1979, and Dominican Republic 1992) provided direction for the Catholic Church in the region for many years to come. This meeting in Aparecida, Brazil figures to do the same. Issues high on the agenda include the rise of evangelical Protestantism, poverty, civil engagement, family issues and the environment. Above all, in appearances before the conference and his opening of the gathering, Pope Benedict hopes to rekindle the faith in Brazil and Latin America, reestablishing the strength of the Church in this Catholic heartland. He aims to prove that despite his attention to Europe, Islam, and other issues, Latin America remains a focus for the Holy See. Highlights of the pope's schedule appear in paragraph seventeen. End Summary.

Catholicism in Latin America - Key for the Holy See

2. (SBU) Eighty-year-old Pope Benedict has not traveled much in his pontificate, and only once outside of Europe, but he made a visit to Latin America a priority. The region holds obvious import for the Holy See as home to a third of the world's Catholics - some 450 million people. This reality is reflected in the Vatican bureaucracy. It is the only geographical region for which the Vatican has a special commission, providing policy guidance for the pope in close collaboration with Latin America's bishops. Latin Americans feature prominently in the Vatican hierarchy. Archbishop Leonardo Sandri, an Argentinean,

occupies the number three position as head of general Church affairs. Latin American cardinals head the powerful Congregation for the Clergy, the Council for the Family, and the Council for Health Care.

13. (C) But the region also feels neglected by the Vatican. There had been talk of electing the first Latin American pope after the death of Pope John Paul II. Many Latin Americans were disappointed when it didn't happen. Then Benedict's initial focus on the spiritual roots of Europe, the challenge of Islam, and ecumenical relations (working to heal the ancient rift with the Orthodox) suggested to many that Latin America was not on the front burner for the Holy See. Brazilian Monsignor Stefano Migliorelli, a Vatican official leading preparations for Benedict's trip, admits that the perception is deeply rooted. There's no doubt that it played a "key role" in the pope's decision to go to Brazil, he told us. The pope needs to show Latin America that it counts.

Why Brazil?

14. (C) The Brazil trip and CELAM meeting offer the pope a chance to demonstrate his interest in the region, and for him to put his mark on the Latin American Church. His task is to reconnect with the people. Brazil - and much of Latin America - is like mission territory, Migliorelli said, using the Catholic term for lands that haven't been systematically exposed to the faith. "We have to approach this like evangelization - starting from scratch," he continued. And Brazil is the key to the Latin Church, Migliorelli told us, both because of the huge number of Catholics there, and the fact that from the Catholic perspective it suffers from many of the problems (evangelical sects, poverty, environmental challenges) that one sees in other parts of the region. When meeting with South American cardinals

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two years ago, it was Pope Benedict who chose the location of the meeting, telling the group he wanted to hold it at the most popular Marian shrine in Brazil.

Family Values and Political Issues

15. (C) In preliminary meetings and messages leading up to the CELAM gathering, the pope has focused mainly on internal Church issues such as promoting vocations to the priesthood and safeguarding Catholic moral teaching on marriage and family life. The region's bishops have been more political in their pre-conference discussions. In his appearances before the conference begins, the pope is more likely to focus on broad questions of faith and morals, while his message to the conference may become more concrete, reflecting the concerns of the bishops. His message will undoubtedly set the tone for the rest of the conference, one top Vatican official told us. "The bishops won't be able to take a different route after the pope has set out his priorities," he added.

¶6. (U) Below, we have outlined some of the themes that will serve as a backdrop for the pope's appearances, and the topics that he and the bishops will address.

Growth of Evangelical Protestantism

¶7. (SBU) When John Paul II made his first trip to Brazil in 1980 Catholics accounted for 89 percent of the population. According to the 2000 census, they had fallen to 74 percent, with the total in some major cities under 60 percent. Each year, millions of Latin American Catholics leave their churches to join mostly evangelical congregations - a departure actively encouraged, according to the Catholic Church, by the pastors of these new flocks. According to one analysis, while the Catholic Church focuses on "saving souls," many of the evangelical churches tackle day-to-day problems while making just enough doctrinal demands to satisfy the Latin American thirst for mysticism. Pope John Paul II described their activity as "sinister". One of Benedict's main tasks will be to reawaken the Catholic community and encourage resistance to what he has called "poaching" by "sects".

The "Threat" of Liberation Theology

¶8. (SBU) Another major contextual issue for the visit is the challenge to the traditional Church played by liberation theology. Pope John Paul (aided by the current pope when he was Cardinal Ratzinger) made major efforts to stamp out this Marxist analysis of class struggle. It had come to be promoted by a significant number of Catholic clergy and lay people, who in a political compromise sometimes sanctioned violence "on behalf of the people." The more orthodox form of liberation theology that sided with the poor and oppressed had undergone a reductionist reading that the Vatican sought to correct. To a large extent, Pope John Paul II beat down "liberation theology", but in the past few years, it has seen a resurgence in various parts of Latin America.

¶9. (C) In March this issue came up again when the Vatican office for doctrine (Benedict's old stomping grounds) issued a note critiquing Basque priest Jon Sobrino's writings on Jesus Christ. Sobrino, a Jesuit who worked for many years in El

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Salvador, was one of Latin America's best known liberation theologians. The publication of the Vatican notification so close to the Aparecida event was a clear message to the Church in Latin America. Still Migliorelli says, "we don't plan to bring up" liberation theology formally in any of the papal addresses. "Everyone knows the situation," he went on. The key is simply for the clergy to be trained more effectively to explain the Church's position to the people, he concluded.

Clerical Woes

¶10. (C) Indeed, Migliorelli said, the crisis of the clergy is a major factor in the region. The priest shortage in much of Latin America is far worse than that in the United States. By some accounts there are ten times fewer priests per capita than in the U.S. What's more, Migliorelli lamented, their level of education is often very low, and they often don't adhere to standards of clerical discipline (celibacy, regular offering of the sacraments, etc.) Although Benedict will be aiming at the laity on this trip, Migliorelli admitted that the clerical issue also requires attention.

Economic Issues

¶11. (C) A preparatory gathering in Rome for the CELAM meeting gave a hint of the interest in economic issues that many of the bishops present shared. At a press conference following the event, the bishops complained about the "unjust distribution of wealth and the abysmal differences in the distribution of resources" in their region. They asked how this could happen when the majority of Latin America's presidents, business people and professionals claim to be Catholics. Migliorelli noted that the Holy See was equally concerned about the great gap between rich and poor in Brazil and much of Latin America, and said it was something the pope would certainly address. He didn't expect the pontiff to get into the weeds of trade policy, but said that equitable trade in the era of globalization was also part of the economic context.

Deterioration of Society

¶12. (SBU) In the lead-up to the CELAM meeting, Latin American bishops have also expressed their concern over the general "deterioration" of society in their region. The president of Guatemala's bishops conference, Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri, lamented omnipresent societal violence and described "societies that try to follow lifestyles of consumerism and hedonism" with little regard for social justice. Challenges regarding crime, migration, and education will be among the issues that the region's bishops will bring to the discussion in Aparecida, and will undoubtedly find their way, at least in broad strokes, into the pope's remarks. For the Holy See and the bishops, many of these ills can be traced to the dissolution of the family and the lack of attention to "moral values". The pope and the bishops will undoubtedly make the family a centerpiece of their remarks.

Environment

¶13. (SBU) Other bishops will seek attention for environmental issues. Recently, Archbishop Pedro Barreto Jimeno of Peru said the region's wealth of natural resources and the variety of its cultures contrasted sharply with the "extreme poverty" in urban shantytowns, highland villages and Amazonian communities. The archbishop said Andean glaciers were in rapid retreat leaving farmers without water "within two decades." He decried the destruction of one-fifth of the Amazon rain forest and the continuing pillage that sees some 20,000 square miles disappear every year. Again, the pope is unlikely to delve into the details of these issues as much as the bishops will, but he may well refer to them. More than previous popes, Benedict has noted environmental challenges.

Hot Spots

¶14. (C) Monsignor Angelo Accattino, Holy See MFA lead on CELAM and several Latin American countries, acknowledged the Holy See's concerns and interest in Latin American hot spots such as Venezuela and Cuba. But this was not the venue, he said, to engage on what he called "political issues". He said the pope would not comment on controversial leaders, and didn't think regional bishops would do differently. If we can help rejuvenate the Church with this visit, other issues (and leaders) will be easier to deal with, Accattino said. When pressed, he acknowledged that in Cuba and Venezuela the issues at stake were based on human rights - fertile ground for the pope and bishops. He maintained, however, that the pope would steer clear of all but the broadest questions.

Brazil - Holy See Bilateral Issues

¶15. (C) Brazilian diplomats here have told us that the Holy See has been laid back about bilateral issues. When the Brazilian DCM approached the Vatican to ask what issues they might want to raise in the papal meeting with President da Silva, Holy See officials said they had no preference, only asking that Brazil let them know what their side would like to raise. In the end, the Brazilians simply left the agenda open. There had been talk of finalizing a concordat between the two sides (regularizing some Church-State issues), but all realized that there was no way to complete work on the document in time for the visit. The Brazilians expect the pope will raise family issues in the bilateral context, as the government has some role in this area. Our Brazilian contacts noted that Brazil's progressive stances on some homosexual partnership issues could attract Benedict's attention.

Comment

¶16. (C) Four U.S. bishops, including the top U.S. Churchman at

the Vatican, Cardinal William Levada, will attend the CELAM conference, suggesting that it may impact even beyond the boundaries of Latin America. The participation of a Canadian cardinal also emphasizes the Holy See's vision of solidarity in the Americas. The Holy See has placed great emphasis on the trip, anticipating that it will be an important moment in this pontificate. Sources tell us that Benedict has sequestered himself in recent days to devote his full attention to finalizing his speeches, which will be delivered in Portuguese. In the end, the trip will be a success if Benedict is able to rekindle enthusiasm for the Catholic Church in Brazil, and also impact the wider region, focusing Catholics on "faith, family, and morals". We expect a document to come out of the Aparecida meeting by the end of 2007, focusing on some of the more

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concrete issues noted above. End comment.

Papal Schedule

¶17. (U) Major events on Pope Benedict XVI's schedule:

The complete schedule may be viewed at

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/travels/2007/documents/trav_ben-xvi_br%C3%AAsile-program_20070509_en.html

- May 9, late evening arrival in Sao Paolo, official speech at the airport welcome ceremony.

- May 10 Sao Paolo, meeting with President Lula, ecumenical encounter, lunch with the Brazilian bishops conference, (at Paceambu Soccer Stadium) meeting with young people.

- May 11 Sao Paolo, Campo de Marte airfield, Mass to canonize a Brazilian saint (morning), meeting with Brazil's bishops at Sao Paolo Cathedral (afternoon), flight to Aparecida (evening).

- May 12, travel to Guaratingueta for encounter with recovering substance abusers (morning), lunch with CELAM delegates, Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida for prayer service(evening).

- May 13, Mass with bishops to inaugurate CELAM meeting (morning), opening of meeting with key note address (afternoon), papal address and departure for Rome after formal farewell ceremony (late evening).

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